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Risks and Alternatives to Militarism after Desert Storm:  
Lessons from the Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis

In August, 1990, my ongoing research and writing project on psychosocial sources of risk in military crises, focussing on the Cuban Missile Crisis and drawing both on new data and my own hitherto-unrevealed findings from my participation in the crisis and from my prior secret official study of it, was interrupted by the new crisis brought on by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and President Bush's response.

As it became plain to me in late August that Bush's strategy went beyond blockade (the first since the Missile Crisis) to preparations for and threats of invasion (comparable to those made by President Kennedy against Cuba in 1962, but this time, it seemed to me, with no element of bluff) I postponed my efforts to understand the current implications of a past crisis in favor of directly resisting the escalation of a present one.

After spending the last seven months doing everything I could think of--educating myself, addressing teach-ins, lobbying Congress, speaking at demonstrations, participating in marches and vigils, meeting with peace organizations (e.g., SANE-Freeze, the Military Families Support Network, and various ad hoc coalitions), giving interviews for print, radio and TV, several arrests for non-violent civil disobedience, and writing for publication--to avert war in the Persian Gulf and then, to end the war before it led to a US ground offensive, I now plan to spend the next several months, in part, drawing lessons from failure (my own, the peace movement's) and arguing with success (the President's).

It seems realistic and useful to describe my near-term project in these somewhat unpromising terms. I remember when I was young, at a time when America was anxious for words of hope in the early days of the Second World War, being impressed by the contrarian candor of General Stilwell when he accompanied Chinese troops emerging from Burma after being routed by the Japanese. Others were trying to put the best face on this "setback," as on others; Stilwell said, "I say we took a hell of a licking."

We have just had a hell of a setback: those of us who have worked for years--and with utmost urgency during this crisis--to encourage peaceful resolution of conflicts, who saw real prospects only a year ago that the ending of the Cold War could lead to a truly new world order and a radical shrinkage of world armaments, and who have sought--as Michael Klare once defined our long-term goal--to "undermine the cultural hegemony of militarism." (Though it is well to remember that General Stilwell's side did, in the end, win the war.)

The struggle continues; but the cultural and psychological (as well as economic) roots of militarism in this society have just revealed their power--so ably drawn on by the President--and our own alternate values and visions have never, in my lifetime, been so openly and aggressively challenged.

The President's spectacular success in his own terms--which do not count Iraqi casualties, military or civilian, nor the near-chaotic instabilities in the region wrought by the destruction of Iraq, and which see as benefit rather than loss the exaltation of military values and armaments and the rejection of hard-won lessons of Vietnam--points toward further disdain for negotiation, exacerbation of conflicts, and further US military interventions. In one or another of the latter the lessons of Vietnam will probably be painfully regained.

In my view, the "Vietnam Syndrome" whose demise the President sought in war and now celebrates--understood as public allergy to overseas military adventures, skepticism toward official rationales, and a sense that citizen activism is legitimate and effective in averting or ending unnecessary and wrongful wars--was a national asset to be treasured, not an illness to be "kicked."

If that Vietnam Syndrome has truly been lost in the light of the Desert Storm "triumph," it is up to those of us who have opposed the arms race, intervention in Central America and this war to try to reconstruct it in our society, on a firmer, better-understood and broader basis: and to do this without the aid of disastrous new military experience.

That is a tall order. It calls for continued work of public education of the sort that burgeoned during the last seven months: teach-ins, lectures, interviews, demonstrations. These are in fact scheduled; I have been invited to participate in a number of such events already, and I shall do so.

But it calls also for reflection, research, discussion among ourselves. Rampant militarism in the spring of 1991 needs not only to be resisted, it remains to be better understood; surely we who oppose it have had our surprises in recent months, and we must work to learn from them. That too I take as my task.

Precisely in this context it seems more relevant than ever to return to the research that preoccupied me in the summer of 1990, until the guns of August in Kuwait: contemporary lessons to be drawn from the secret history of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In early October I wrote a brief memo with the heading: "The Persian Gulf Crisis of 1990: What is to be learned from the previous prewar blockade?" [attached] drawing attention to numerous generally-unremarked parallels between these two episodes, the only



two cases since World War II of naval blockades accompanied by threats of air attack and invasion.

The Cuban Missile Crisis ended as a triumph for President Kennedy (to his great surprise), a triumph of intimidation. It did not result in war, as many had feared; but in retrospect the risks were real, and in some ways different and greater than the participants realized.

President Bush's very comparable strategy of intimidation in the Persian Gulf did not succeed--indeed, it now seems unlikely that he expected or even really wanted it to succeed--and the war he had been preparing for six months ensued. Yet this crisis, too, ended in a Presidential triumph, one comparable in its drama only to Kennedy's in Cuba.

Was this victory achieved without major risk? What were the risks; were they worth taking; and why did the President accept the risks he saw? Even more confidently than it seemed in October, I can say that my own data on and interpretation of the Cuban Missile Crisis throws very useful light on these currently pressing questions.

The same is true for the questions: How did Saddam Hussein see his risks before and during the confrontation; and why did he accept the risks he saw? And: how did the two courses of action interact to increase risks for the region (including ecological disaster and possible nuclear first use--in response to Iraqi chemical attack--by Israel, the UK or the United States)?

In an earlier description of my ongoing research on psychosocial sources of risk in crises, I referred to three hidden sources of risk revealed in my research: the proclivity of those in power to gamble with catastrophe rather than suffer humiliation; the readiness of subordinates to follow policies they may perceive as disastrous; and the tendency of leaders to underestimate the danger of loss of control of operations under combat conditions.

(I happen to suspect that these proclivities are related not only to positions of power but to the gender of the almost entirely male power structure. As suggested by the attached references from my speeches and interviews of the last half year, I will be exploring the factor of machismo as a cultural underpinning for the militarism expressed on both sides of this conflict; and the potential of the "gender gap" revealed in polls as basis for an alternative politics.)

In the wake of US military triumph, the pertinence of the above sources of danger is most dramatically apparent on the side of Iraq. But unless the expressed or leaked concerns of US officials for the potentially grave risks for the US and its allies in this conflict were entirely feigned and without basis--I do not

believe they were, at least for the first several months of the confrontation--the psychosocial roots of American gambling with catastrophe, and obedience, remain also relevant: as is a willingness to massacre "enemies" without great regard for the number or nature of victims, also a focus of my earlier research.

The particular pattern of interaction that I first analyzed in connection with the Cuban Missile Crisis, described then as the "Theory of the Fait Malaccompli" (see attached memo of September 29, 1990) seems particularly illuminating with respect to Saddam Hussein's calculations surrounding his abortive attempt to annex Kuwait by means of a fait accompli, and to President Bush's reaction to the potential this posed for a debate humiliating to himself over "Who lost Kuwait?" This interpretation, among others, has important inferences for the likelihood and circumstances of further crises.

The lessons I would draw from the two crises considered together have the potential to help this country avoid reproducing the history subsequent to Kennedy's success in 1962, which led, in less than two years, to a fateful attempt by the same cast of officials to repeat that triumph in the Tonkin Gulf, the South China Sea off the coast of Vietnam.